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WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC/NEC - GARY EDSON, JOHN CLOUD, T ERATH;  
STATE FOR E - U/S LARSON,, EB - A/S WAYNE, KLEMM, MALAC,  
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SUBJECT: BIOTECH: ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS?

REF: A. (A) ROME 3481 (B)VATICAN 3584 (C) ROME 2331 (D)  
BRUSSELS 3428  
[1](#)B. (E) MILAN 488 (F) MILAN 512 (G) MILAN 523 (H)  
MILAN 539

Classified By: CDA Emil Skodon for reasons 1.5 B and D.

1.(U) This is an action message; see para 18.

#### SUMMARY

2.(C) In the last several weeks, we have noticed a significant shift in the Italian approach to biotechnology. More and more attention is being given the practical issues of resolution - authorization procedures, thresholds, co-existence guidelines-- and less attention to ideological rhetoric with the notable exception of the President of the Piedmont region. We believe that by consistently bringing the consensus of U.S., European, and prominent developing country scientists to bear on the emotional arguments of biotech opponents in Italy, including the Minister of Agriculture, we have helped to shift the argument from whether biotechnology should be allowed at all in Italy, to when and under which circumstances. Despite seizures of corn fields in the Italian north, the actual acreage destroyed is a tiny percentage of the 1.2 million hectares under cultivation. While the voices of opponents--farm group Coldiretti, far left environmental groups like VAS--continue to be loud and shrill, there is a growing temperance in the response of government officials to the seizure of fields and consequent injury to farmers.

[1](#)3. (C) We believe the time is right to press Italy during its EU presidency to account fully in its national laws for the progress made at the European level (01/018, T&L; F&F), to encourage early adoption of a seed thresholds package for AP in conventional seeds acceptable to U.S. industry, and to implement coexistence in such a way that Italian farmers could plant EU-approved biotech seed varieties in the next planting season, as Minister Alemanno has promised (Ref A). Continued science-based arguments in public, combined with tough political pressure on GOI officials behind the scenes, will be needed to accomplish these objectives. End Summary.

#### IS SCIENCE WEIGHING MORE HEAVILY IN ITALIAN POLICY DELIBERATIONS?

4.(C) Milan reftels report the sequestration, testing, and in some cases the destruction of corn plants thought to be derived from conventional seed contaminated with low levels of GM material. While no one is pleased to see these seizures, which pander to the far left green organizations and the defiantly anti-biotech farmers' organization Coldiretti, two things have impressed us in our conversations with officials and scientists. First is the general view that the seizures must end because they serve no health or environmental purpose and injure farmers. "Is Ghigo (the President of the Piedmont Region) mad?", asks his long time associate and our best friend at the Ministr of Environment, Director General Corrado Clini. Nonetheless, Ghigo himself, in a "La Stampa" open letter (Aug. 12) defended himself with respect to the seizures in Piemonte, urging a precautionary approach. He repeated often heard arguments for maintaining agricultural quality and the risk of creating biotech seed monopolies in the hands of a few multinationals.

[1](#)5. (C) Our scientist friends have asked sharp questions about how fields are being identified for sequestration and testing, and in Emilia-Romagna, greater care was taken to sample plants growing in the field for evidence of transgenic specimens, and not simply to rush from tests for

AP of GM on seeds to destruction of crops. When we asked about plant samples we were told how many plants, sample preparation, and testing methods used in the lab. And,

according to some reports, fields sequestered in Friuli were saved from destruction and converted into experimental fields with the imprimatur of the Ministry of Agriculture. In the Veneto region, where only a few fields have been sequestered, the VAS, a radical green group, accused the regional government of covering-up contamination, and harming unknowing farmers. Still, no fields have been destroyed. In the Tuscany region, legal progress is slowly being made. On August 8, Judge Antonio Crivelli of the Florence tribunal court denied the Tuscany region's request to sequester GM fields in the province of Florence. The judge cited that this case cannot be considered similar to offenses like the addition of chemical additives or the presence of residual plant insecticides. Involved were seeds tested for GM presence to a threshold of 0.07 percent, deemed accidental and non-criminal.

16. (U) Also on August 12, in a near rebuke to Ghigo and Piedmont, the Ministry of Agriculture agreed with officials from the regions of Veneto, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, Emilia Romagna and Lombardia, to harvest corn in fields thought to contain GM seeds, and only after harvesting and testing, to decide whether the crop can be used for feed or will be used for "non-food" biofuel applications. Note: Significantly, the deal- which must still be reviewed at the political level in the regions- was brokered by Giuseppe Ambrosio, a key adviser to MINAG Alemanno. Ambrosio is widely viewed as an opponent of biotechnology and is closely associated with the interests of Coldiretti. End Note.

17. (U) The daily "La Stampa" carried on August 13 several reactions to Ghigo's open letter. MinAG Alemanno provided a text which commends Ghigo for his understanding that the issue of biotech is the issue of farmer and consumer choice, but then goes on to mention the EC coexistence guidelines, the upcoming Cancun WTO round, US-EU differences on labelling, and concludes that firm rules are needed to keep biotech and non-biotech production separate. In the same article, former Minister of Agriculture Paolo de Castro (and a speaker at the biotech program organized by Consulate Naples last fall) argues that there are no health or ethical concerns associated with biotech, and that Italy should not make the same mistake with regard to biotech that it made with nuclear power (in 1987, by national referendum, Italians voted post-Chernobyl to stop the development of nuclear power plants). August Bocchini, President of Confagricoltura, responded in plain words to Ghigo's fear of multinational control of biotech by saying that if Italy doesn't get back into research, it will help bring about a monopoly and a probable decline in Italian agriculture. Only Coldiretti defended Ghigo's actions.

8.(C) As Ref A reported, even MinAG Alemanno comes to meetings these days armed with tables of testing result and schematic drawings with numerical thresholds for GM presence in organic, conventional, and biotech agriculture. While we do not believe this portends a clean break from emotionalism to reason regarding biotech in the immediate future, there is a shift from ideology to the nitty gritty of numbers implied by the new EU rules on food and feed, traceability and labeling, seed thresholds, and coexistence guidelines.

9.(U) Even some press seems to be moving our way. Even before the Ghigo open letter, the weekly magazine "I Tempi", produced by the pro-government, center-right daily "Il Giornale", devoted back-to-back issues to GMOS, and two weeks ago offered a "non-interview" with MinAG Alemanno, who had promised to meet with the magazine on Monday July 26, but stood them up-- amusingly so, since he was meeting with the Ambassador at the time of the scheduled interview. The magazine has also raised the interesting question of biotech organic agriculture in an article by University of Milan Professor Francesco Sala. And the announcement by Vatican officials of a meeting in November to reconsider the position of the Catholic Church on

biotechnology (Ref b) has been widely reported in the Italian press (despite clarifications from the Vatican) as an imminent endorsement of biotechnology by the Church. MINAG Alemanno has allowed that the Vatican move is an important one, and will have to be considered--he wants to talk.

10.(U) Despite the vehemence of the Coldiretti organization of small landholding farmers, who recently cited a U.S. survey showing most American consumers are opposed to GM foods, Confagricoltura, the organization of big farmers, has embraced the apparent Vatican change of heart and the new EU rules coming into force to argue that Italy should invest in biotech research and prepare the way now not just

for import of labeled biotech products into Italy, but for the production of biotech products in Italy. And in an analytical piece published August 5, we read how permitting the import of biotech products (mostly feeds) into Italy, while barring the cultivation of the same varieties in Italy, may severely disadvantage Italian farmers.

IS OUTREACH TO SCIENTISTS HELPING US IN ITALY? YES, BUT THERE ARE LIMITS

11.(SBU) As detailed ref (C), Mission Italy, USDA and USAID joined forces at the end of May to support a major international conference titled "From the Green Revolution to the Gene Revolution" hosted by the University of Bologna. More than three hundred scientists from more than thirty countries attended, headlined by Nobel Peace prize winner Norman Borlaug, and two World Food Prize laureates. Swaminatham Monkombu, and Gurdev Khush. These three scientists can legitimately claim to be the fathers of the Green revolution, and they spoke vigorously to the importance of biotechnology to global food security, especially in the developing world where the number of new mouths to feed is growing most rapidly. The scientists agreed that biotech foods were safe, that biotechnology represented a considerable advance in precision and speed of developing new plant and crop varieties, and that the complex regulatory schemes imposed by governments (especially in Europe) were pushing public sector research into the hands of multinationals, and delaying the transfer of benefits to farmers. Swiss scientist Ingo Potrykus recounted in especially plain language the consequences for children of the delays in approving the release of vitamin A enhanced golden rice.

12.(SBU). The scientists included a number of representatives from Africa and Asia who were supported by USAID, and a dozen U.S. scientists supported by USDA and Mission Rome's public affairs office. Consulates Milan and Naples arranged programs for Dr. Ron Phillips and Dr. Allison Snow, respectively, and Rome EST Counselor traveled with Dr. Calvin Qualset to the University of Udine for the first U.S. sponsored seminar in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. EST COUNS also helped recruit the Minister of Science and Technology from South Africa to attend the meeting.

13. (SBU) The University of Bologna did a singularly and perhaps deliberately poor job of mobilizing local press for the event. Borlaug was featured positively in a feature piece in Il Resto di Carlino, Bologna's major daily, but no major papers covered the conference, despite energetic approaches by public affairs in Rome. The important closing remarks by the Minister of Science from South Africa were not covered by the media at all. The conference declaration may be found at: <http://137.204.42.130/doublehelix/index.html>.

14.(SBU) The scientists agreed on three major points important to our understanding of the role they are prepared to play in supporting biotechnology in agriculture in Italy and elsewhere. First, they do not see biotechnology as the only, or even the most important tool in improving world food supplies and the sustainability of LLI, MURPHY, MOWREY, SLOAN, WHITE; AGRICULTURE FOR DAVID HEGWOOD; USDA/FAS/MACKE/JONES WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC/NEC - GARY EDSON, JOHN CLOUD, T ERATH; STATE FOR E - U/S LARSON,, EB - A/S WAYNE, KLEMM, MALAC, EUR-PDAS RIES, ENGLISH US

global agriculture. They endorse biotechnology from the perspective of the farmer and his (most often her) livelihood, and from the environmental benefit of saving more land from intensive agriculture. Second, they believe governments, including the U.S. government, have failed to support public funding for research, and this has by default turned research over to industry, and limited the targets of research to major crops--corn, cotton, soy, and rape. Scientists like Roger Beachy from the Danforth Center in St.Louis stressed the need of research on agriculturally valuable crops of the developing world. Last, scientists believe that three interlocking factors--overly restrictive intellectual property rights awarded to multinationals, low public confidence (especially in Europe) in the motives of multinationals and the competence of governmental authorities responsible for food safety, and overly expensive and non-science based approval and regulatory schemes -- are blocking farmer's access to important biotech varieties in the developed and developing world.

15. (C) Our experience with the Bologna conference, which was a singular and brilliant scientific event, is that

scientists speak most confidently and even loudly among themselves. Borlaug railed at modern Europeans who have forgotten what it is like to feel hunger, and the audience stood and applauded. Yet no press was in the room to be similarly stirred, and no gains were made among the general public, who paid more attention to the array of colorful condoms and the "Peace for Food" slogans present at the conference closing session than to the "Food for Peace" slogan of the conference organizers. Still, we strengthened the conviction of Italian researchers to speak out against the anti-biotech policies of the GOI, and in fact, University of Bologna scientist Roberto Tuberosa has been writing and speaking out steadily since the May conference, joining familiar Embassy and Consulate contacts like University of Milan's Francesco Sala and Assobiotech President Sergio Dompe who continue their efforts on behalf of biotech in Italy. These are the same people in the forefront of the corn seizures debate.

#### WHAT IS TO BE DONE NEXT?

16. (C) Mission Italy, and our sister missions--Embassy Vatican and the U.S. Mission to the UN Agencies-- have worked together to combat the most ideological and hard-line opponents of biotechnology by strengthening the voices of the scientific communities, encouraging farm organizations to consider the advantages of biotech for their members, and arguing the case for employing biotechnology to alleviate hunger in the developing world. At the political level, the GOI has generally held us at bay by saying a European level framework needed to precede any Italian action to move forward on biotech. Whether or not we like all the elements of the EU approach, they now give us the tools to push the GOI hard at the political level-- after the August vacation, of course--to live up to their word and let consumers and farmers choose. There seems to be recognition across the GOI that the EU rules will require Italy to open its markets to biotech, and our goal ought to be to get them to take that recognition public, and in some sense take advantage of the very communities and themes we have stressed to move quickly from an anti-biotech to a more sensible and science-based acceptance of the technology. In a government that cites public opinion polls to us as a principal reason for delaying progress on biotech, there is probably some political understanding of how the government can act in relation to polls.

17. (C) In short, our view is that we should press Italy to bring itself in line with the EU and stop being a laggard. This was the thrust of Ambassador Sembler's July 23 editorial, which was especially well received by scientists involved in biotech policy in the GOI. In terms of programming and strategy, it means we continue to work ourER, NOVELLI, MURPHY, MOWREY, SLOAN, WHITE; AGRICULTURE FOR DAVID HEGWOOD; USDA/FAS/MACKE/JONES WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC/NEC - GARY EDSON, JOHN CLOUD, T ERATH; STATE FOR E - U/S LARSON,, EB - A/S WAYNE, KLEMM, MALAC, EUR-PDAS RIES, ENGL

themes, but also to remind the GOI that it must also account for a likely change in the position of the Church and be accountable to the slightly less elevated authority of Brussels as well.

18. (C) ACTION REQUESTED: In order for us to craft an effective strategy that is also fully in-line with U.S. policy, we will need to know in a few weeks where we stand on the EU food and feed and traceability and labeling rules, and also where we will stand on AP thresholds for conventional seeds if the EC scientific committee reports out tolerances as expected in the mid-fall. As Brussels 3428 (ref D) points out, the likelihood is that T&L will be applied in January 2004 and F&F in April of 2004, assuming both are published in the Official Journal in September. Last, and probably most important in the case of Italy, we will need to develop clear and scientifically sound positions on coexistence which take into account the Italian view that organic, conventional, and biotech agriculture must be managed under the precautionary principle, and not under risk assessment procedures. Washington guidance will be essential to our success. Skodon

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